

What Lies Beneath? Shortcomings of the Children's Rights Discourse in Confronting Child Labour in Bangladesh and India

Tania Hardcastle

Department of Law

The Children's Rights Discourse led by international NGOs, intergovernmental and trade organisations trivialises economic and socio-cultural impetuses, silences direct participation from children and their duty bearers, and disproportionately censors the state. This counteracts its objective to confront child labour in Bangladesh and India by delineating it from its underlying causes, namely poverty, culture, and the inescapability of neoliberal strictures. The children's rights discourse propels an absolutist, "universal" model which castigates child labour at the expense of alienating those it claims to help. Ultimately, children are driven by the economic necessity to work in order to survive, yet become stigmatised for doing so.

Rather, working with local NGOs and grassroots movements to encourage a bottom-up participatory discourse is an imperative precondition of confronting child labour. Such

movements have emboldened the creation of Children's Trade Unions to achieve fairer working conditions without the arbitrary imposition of a rights discourse outlawing child labour altogether. Understanding the rights discourse through the lens of preordained traditions softens cultural barriers and enables a greater appreciation of the wrongfulness of child labour from the aggressor's perspective. This requires a beyond rights-exclusive approach. Moreover, reallocating state responsibility can be helped by unveiling the cooptation and vested interests of corporate agendas. The rights discourse needs accountability through engagement and an understanding that transcends structural economic and socio-cultural barriers if it is to be effective in confronting child labour in Bangladesh and India. This may necessitate the concession that curbing child poverty precedes the eradication of child labour.